World-making Models

TONI HILDEBRANDT

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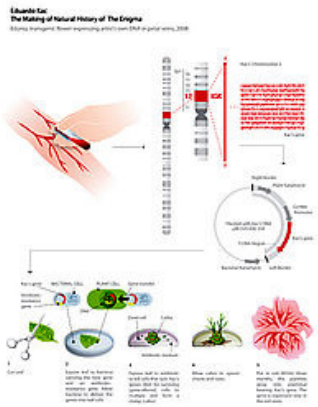

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The Role of Images and Aesthetic Experience in Bio Art

Eduardo Kac in conversation with Toni Hildebrandt
Paris, 14 June 2011

T.H.: Eduardo, you started as an artist in the 1980s with visual poetry and a manifold body of work, which was closely connected to body politics. The 80s revealed the importance of mass media, new image politics and many different techniques of visualization, especially in the field of the fine arts and visual communication. Can you explain how your working process changed and developed from the early 80s onward into the postdigital paradigm of our time? I would also like to address a question that is of particular concern to the NCCR eikones: How does the digital revolution in an almost completely image-based society create special forms of power and meaning? Of course, the real question is, how did you react critically as an artist within this image-based society?

E.K.: Well, let's see. The work that I was doing in the early 80s was very much invested in its historical and political moment, because I was living under a dictatorship and in that context the conception of the body revolved to a great extent around suffering, around the tortured body, the body whose life has been eliminated. It was a very present reality associated with the body and I wanted, as a young man, to make a very strong statement against this situation. I wanted to invest that work in a transformative vector. I wanted the work to be invested in building a new reality that was different from the reality I lived in.

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So I thought that in the context of history, political movements and political actions had gone from heroic figures who theorized revolutions, to mass movements that carried out rebellious transformations, to one's individual reality. It was a political act to resist in your own individual life the oppressive impact of party ideology, but also ideology in the largest sense, that establishes hierarchies, that establishes ideas of normality and deviation and these kinds of polarities. So I invented a kind of poetry made to be presented and experienced directly in the social space, because there was no social space.

T.H.: What kind of poetry did you create and what was its relation to social reality?

E.K.: I called it «pornpoetry,» because I subverted porn and turned it into a politically progressive tool. Every language has expressions that betray an ideology. When you say to somebody «fuck you» and you say that aggressively – the question is, why do you take something that is supposed to be of great pleasure and transform it into a verbal weapon? When you look at a person and you call that person a «cow» or a «bitch,» why do you take another mammal, another member of the community of life, and use that word with the intention to offend? One of the semiological subversions I implemented in my pornpoetry was to undermine this process of stigmatization.

So, in my poems of that period, I would take such an expression and I would build a poem around it, so that when you finally arrive at this expression, it doesn't mean the aggressiveness that it means in typical discourse. So it subverts that ideology by subverting the material instantiation of that ideology in discursive reality. The poems also used humor, not commonly found in serious poetry, to short-circuit and implode the social reality that conservative language produces.

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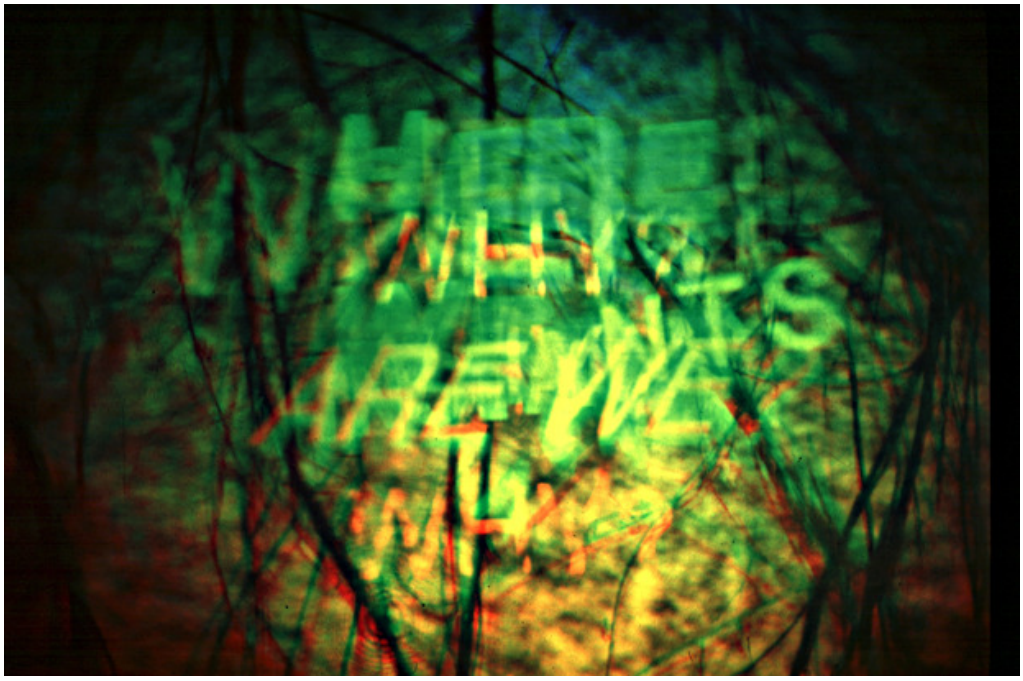
T.H.: I think it's important to emphasize that we are not speaking about introversive readings of poetry in a very traditional sense, but about a connection of poetry and performance art. So we are touching on both the materiality of the poem and its physical relation to society.

E.K.: Yes, these poems were meant to be yelled out on the streets, not read on a printed page. And because of this presence on the streets, this relationship with the audience of the living body that was presenting the text directly to the reader, to the listener, it involved sound, movement, the body, clothing (such as my pink miniskirt) and the lack of clothing (i.e., nudity), and a lot of other nonverbal elements that became the prosody of the poem. So, being aware of that, I started to bring into the poem additional nonverbal elements that further expanded the richness of the experience, including visual poetry.

T.H.: You refer to the use of nonverbal elements. One possible way of nonverbalization is always the making and the design of images. So how did new visual media change your working process, the way your artworks are experienced and their efficacy as a potential form of political criticism?

E.K.: It enriched the realm in which I could realize my project. The poems in verse, which were not written for the printed page, were written to be yelled out on the street. But the visual poetry could be printed successfully, those were written for the medium of the page, as exemplified by my artist's book «Escracho,» from 1983. In the early 1980s I also made graffiti poems, in addition to t-shirt and sticker poems. Publishing in this alternative way made the poem a visual urban intervention, instead of a reclusive artifact demanding silent and immobile reading. I created my first digital poem in 1982, my first holographic poem in 1983, and I started to work online in 1985, but that's another story.



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T.H.: And how did that new realm help you to be more critical? Or was criticism only a minor aspect of your artistic development, since you have also developed new techniques, as exemplified by the aforementioned visual poems?

E.K.: The point is: what are the kinds of syntax that can respond to the world we live in, or more importantly, to the world we want to build? There's a clear critical stance in asking this question and having it propel the work.

T.H.: I would like to discuss this point with a specific example. Can you please explain the special syntax of what you call holographic poems?

E.K.: Between 1983 and 1993 I created a series of twenty-four holographic poems in which I explore a discontinuous syntax of fluctuating or transforming letters and words. So there is no gestalt, no unified form.

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T.H.: How would you specify the visual efficacy of holography in this context?

E.K.: Holography was the technical solution for an aesthetic problem that I had created for myself, because I felt that the arrival of the first personal computers at the very end of the 70s and the early 80s signified a paradigm shift. They signified very clearly the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy, to use McLuhan's term. The typographic paradigm was over. The computer is no longer just a production tool. Now you can present on and with the computer and the reader can experience the work directly on the computer.

In other words, the computer is no longer a medium of writing but also of reading. And the same instruments that are in the hands of artists to make the work are in the hands of viewers to experience the work. The computer is an environment in which all the different arts converge. You have motion, 3D, interactivity, sound, text, image, animation, programming, and real time. You have to understand that in those days many people had two things in their homes. They had a computer and a separate terminal to go online. To me it was evident that those two things would become one object. So the computer would not only be that environment shared between the reader and the writer, but also a window into the network, which would make it a relational, dialogical window into the other.

T.H.: But why did holography become a paradigmatic medium for your purpose?

E.K.: In 1982 I created my first digital poem, but I felt that the computer in those days was still very, very limited, and even though the paradigm shift was clear, in the experience of the viewer it still somewhat resembled the typographic world. The flatness of the screen evoked the flatness of the page (today even more so with ebooks). Holography did not. What I did in holography could not, cannot be done on the computer screen or the printed page.

T.H.: Can you explain the experience that holography creates between the image and the viewer? How does it influence the image-making process?

E.K.: Well, the question is not holography itself but rather what I wanted to accomplish that I could not accomplish in any other way. I did not use holography as you find it; I did not use holography as a three-dimensional medium. I developed my own techniques in order to create a discontinuous syntax that produces no gestalt. There is no unity of form in the holopoem. I created a turbulent, unstable syntax of spacetime events. Never can you see the whole poem at once.

T.H.: So the crucial point was that you found a way to materialize a kind of absence, a kind of blind spot, in the very presence of the holographic image? I can imagine that a static image, which we can grasp, overlook and also contemplate in its stable and unchanging syntax, was not of interest anymore. But when I look at those holographic images, I wonder: does the viewer actually experience a significantly different kind of time? What do you think?

E.K.: General holographic images are not the point here because most holographic images you see ordinarily, like the ones on your credit card, strive to conform to visual standards. I wrote an essay in which I discuss this at length. [1]

That is not the case in my work. I developed a special system in order to make holopoems that are visually unstable, i.e., holopoems that oscillate, fluctuate, change, disappear, metamorphize and undergo a whole repertoire of actions that I have implemented in order to create the kinds syntax that best suited each holopoem. The way I look at it is this: static images or static texts give the viewer the comfortable illusion of stability. The world is a chaotic place in perpetual transformation. Immutable text and immutable image represent a step away from this chaotic flux of the world. The entire pictorial material of an image presents itself fully and holistically to you. This gives you the illusion of unity; the stable image symbolically stands for the possibility of unity of meaning; the idea that disparate elements can come together to form a meaningful whole. This gives you the illusion of stability between signs and their referents, i.e., that there is a stable relationship between language and things in the world. It gives you the illusion of the possibility of unification of meaning, when in reality meaning is in endless flux and is the object of perpetual negotiation. I wanted to produce the lived experience of a constant unhinging of the signifier/signified, the undoing of what we inherited from Saussure. [2] I wanted to create this new art and I understood that it would have to be created in a medium that enabled the direct experience of verbal/visual instability. In the 1980s holography was this medium. In 1987 I made my first digital holopoem (let's be clear: a digital holopoem is not seen on a computer screen; it is a true hologram) because I realized I could use digital techniques to further extend the instability I wanted to create.

T.H.: You are discussing stability and instability on the level of the signifier and the signified. I would like to discuss this question again by focusing on the temporality of the image. Many studies have emphasized the relevance of a concept of temporality also for static images. For example, when we think about the use of composition or pictorial structure in early modernism and its relation with time and animation: Temporality was a continuous motif in the reflections of many artists, who were producing static images, like Robert Delaunay did here in Paris.

E.K.: You said it yourself: in this case it's a motif, a theme. This is a metaphorical use of the word temporality because the picture itself is a finite, static, immutable material composition — which may allude to or borrow from actual moving media or objects, such as cinema and airplanes. In the age of real moving images, you can't literally say a painting has temporality; only as a trope can you say it and you have to be straightforward about it. When the material reality of the object of study does not match the conceptual ambitions of theorists, they sometimes succumb to conceptual temptations to make it conform.

One has to be very careful and avoid overtheorizing. Now, the experience of the viewer is another issue. The phenomenon of experience is undoubtedly temporal. To me the real challenge is in changing things at a physical, material level, because it is there that you change the world itself. So, what I am talking about is that, here, in my holopoetry, the temporality is internal to the artwork itself at the very level of its structural organization — not a metaphor. This kind of radical and literal materiality is intrinsic to my work.

T.H.: Maybe this idea that the temporality of a painting is only metaphorical is a point I cannot completely agree on, but let us again talk about early modernism and an artist whom I think you appreciate: László Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy is very often seen as a founder of early modern aesthetics, he was already part of the Bauhaus in Weimar in the 1920s, but he is also a pioneer of an aesthetic worldview that is very close to yours, I think. Is he not? When I think about his telephone pictures or his writings, or his book Vision in Motion*, for example.* [3]

E.K.: Moholy was one of those artists that fully understood the time he lived in and worked very coherently and consistently to change it, to make it go in a different direction, sometimes even ahead of himself. You look at the Telephone Pictures, which he made in 1922. In his autobiography, *Abstract of an Artist*, which is not exactly an autobiography, but as close as he ever got to one, he says that it was like playing chess by correspondence. But then in his most important work, his last book, he does not even mention that work. He was so much ahead of his time and so much ahead of himself that he could no longer see its relevance—perhaps because that work had no continuity. Before his death neither him nor anybody else continued to create works with telecommunications media. There was, perhaps, the impression that it was not important anymore because it did not have a great impact in his own time. And he didn't go back to it. He went back to a lot of different works of his own, but not to this one. Moholy unfortunately is thought of as a technophile when in reality he considered technology in a very organic way. Recent scholarship by Oliver Botar has shown that Moholy's was a biocentric constructivism. [4] Moholy was very interested in the biological theories and philosophies of his time and rather than being obsessed by technology, he found in technology the only means through which he could make works that simply could not exist before. The *Light-Space Modulator* took eight years of work. So what I find interesting in Moholy are not his solutions, not the specificity of this or that work he made, but his attitude of freeing himself from tradition.

T.H.: There is an aspect of visual communication in the work of Moholy-Nagy that was also very important for another pioneer of the new media and an image-to-image-conversation. I am thinking about Nam June Paik. You spoke with him in 1988 about the relationship of art and technology. [5] *What was your relationship with Nam June Paik and his works of video art and telecommunication?*

E.K.: Given the role that telecommunications has had in shaping society since the telegraph it is only natural that artists would be interested in it. The train was a means of communication in the sense it could make food or an object created in California available in New York. Something that existed in one place now could exist in another place. That's communication, like a sound from Paris that can be heard in New York. I understand communication as more than an exchange of signs.

T.H.: So again, it was rather a certain attitude in which Nam June Paik worked, that probably interested you?

E.K.: In a sense, Moholy, Nam June, myself, and other artists all have the same understanding that new communication media reshape social relations and enable the very physical reality of the world to come into being. Moholy had radio. Paik had television. Today you have other things: smartphones, all kinds of mobile devices, Twitter, and Facebook that continuously modify forms of intersubjectivity. The problem has been an issue since telegraphy has been part of culture. Different artists of different times have addressed that same issue according to the time they live in and the world they want to build.

T.H.: I would like to question this, even if I understand your argumentation concerning that issue. But after all, these different artists in their different times have always worked and made decisions in very different ways. We can analyze their works. History can show their works in retrospective exhibitions. We can have our opinions about their aesthetics. But since artists like Moholy-Nagy and Nam June Paik were not the only artists of their time, not the only artists reacting on the issues of their time, we need to talk about finding a critical perspective.

E.K.: Each artist has his or her own universe, and a critical perspective may be subtly present even if it's not the theme, the topic of the work. Art is too important to be reduced to a vehicle for propaganda, even progressive propaganda.

T.H.: So where is the critical dimension? For example when you were doing the interview with Nam June Paik, an artist who has obviously made up his own universe, did you have a critical distance from his work? Were you criticizing his work and his decisions from your perspective as an artist?

E.K.: As an artist myself first and foremost, I'm not concerned with the specific solutions that this or that artist has arrived at in a specific space and time. That's unique to that artist. I may or may not like it, personally, but I respect it. You can accept or reject it, analyze or just contemplate it, but the decision made by the artist is *the work itself* and therefore is in my view beyond questioning. One more or one less drip would not spoil a Pollock painting, but if he stopped at that last one drip, this is it. Those are decisions that artists make under specific circumstances in their historical period. So what Moholy and Paik have in common is the understanding that since telegraphy communication or telecommunications has become a part of culture and has played a role in modifying social relations. But that understanding doesn't mean anything by itself because artworks are not an understanding. The work is a sculpture, an installation, an event, a performance; the artist makes the work. Artists have their own visual vocabulary, their own syntax, their own worldview, their own investment in changing the world. I enjoy it for what it means in that context for that artist. Yesterday I went to see the Gino Severini retrospective. [6] I can appreciate what he did in his own time without necessarily establishing a relationship with him, which I obviously don't. I don't need or want validation by tradition. I can appreciate tradition for what it is but I am not interested in giving continuity to it.

T.H.: I see. Then your concept of experience also makes no difference between the aesthetics of everyday life and the context of art?

E.K.: I do see differences between the aesthetics of everyday life and the one explored in the context of art, but another way of saying what I mean is that there's a Hegelian prejudice that still percolates. Artworks do not exist to illustrate ideas and cannot be reduced to ideas, to words, to explanations. There's a meaningful dimension to the material reality, to the material network that a piece of art produces, to the irreducible quality of the experience of art.

T.H.: But please let me insist a little more on the critical dimension of your work.

E.K.: You mean art criticism?

T.H.: No, not only, or not in the first instance. I'm referring more to your very position as an artist who tries to create a new reality. When you think about early modernism, art was very often, of course in many different ways, a critique of the historical status quo and the positions of previous traditions.

E.K.: You know, Ezra Pound used to say that the best criticism is the work of the next generation.

T.H.: Okay, I see. Then let us focus on the key concept of the current issue of Rheinsprung 11, which is the concept of model. *A concept with a complex and widespread literature. Do you see any transitions between your work and the category of model?*

E.K.: My artworks are entities that present themselves sensorially to you, that you have to experience. You have to be there to have the experience of interaction. But in addition to that they also reveal a way of being in the world, thinking about the world, reorganizing the world to make present not the world that you know, but the new world I want to create.

T.H.: Your works are exemplifications of a certain new form of organizing the world, of potentiality. Does this correlate with a conception of modeling the world?

E.K.: A model of world-making.

T.H.: One possible world-making?

E.K.: An alternative world-making model. That's exactly right.

T.H.: For example Edunia, from your work Natural History of the Enigma*, which you developed between 2003 and 2008.*

E.K.: Edunia is what I would call *ontological art*, because it is about creating new beings, making a new life form exist in the world.

T.H.: But would you also call it a model *for a new biological reality? Is it an* ontological model*?*

E.K.: Edunia shows that the boundaries between humans and other lifeforms are not as rigid as we often think.

T.H.: Okay, but when we discuss the concept as a very open term, your models *still permit a kind of orientation, even as artworks. And they do so by means of their openness. Would you agree with that?*

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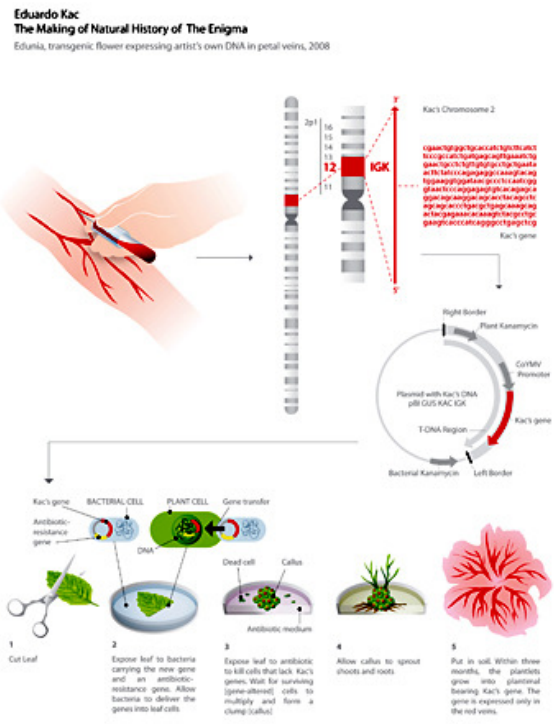
Eduardo Kac
The Making of Natural History of The Enigma
Edunia, transgenic flower expressing artist's own DNA in petal veins, 2008
Kac's Chromosome 2
IGK
Kac's gene
Right Border
Plant Kanamycin
CaYMV Promoter
Plasmid with Kac's DNA
pBI GUS KAC IGK
T-DNA Region
Bacterial Kanamycin
Left Border
BACTERIAL CELL
PLANT CELL
Gene transfer
Antibiotic-resistance gene
DNA
Dead cell
Callus
Antibiotic medium
1
Cut Leaf
2
Expose leaf to bacteria carrying the new gene and an antibiotic-resistance gene. Allow bacteria to deliver the genes into leaf cells.
3
Expose leaf to antibiotic to kill cells that lack Kac's genes. Wait for surviving [gene-altered] cells to multiply and form a clump (callus).
4
Allow callus to sprout shoots and roots.
5
Put in soil. Within three months, the plantlets grow into plantlets bearing Kac's gene. The gene is expressed only in the red veins.

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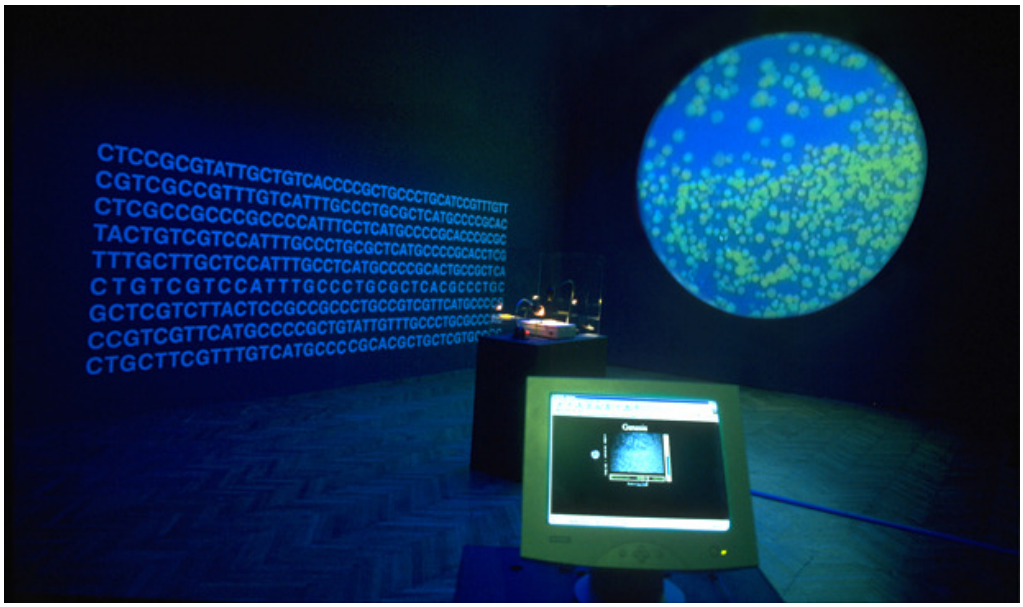
E.K.: Sure, the artwork instantiates a new reality. But the true model is not Edunia itself. Edunia is an embodiment. Edunia in a sense is synecdochically an instantiation of the model that it embodies. The true model here is one that speaks of the permeability or the network among all members of the community of life. And when I talk about ontology I think of the living, exclusively. So I would not say an *ontological model*, because I apply the word «ontology» to the living creature that is there, in front of you. Perhaps *ontological aesthetics*. Yes, because what defines Edunia is not the shape, not necessarily its color, although the red veins are important in this particular case. But it is not a botanical project. What defines her is the fact that she is a plantimal, a category of being which is not a plant and not an animal. So, an *ontological aesthetics*, yes, because as an artist I make artworks and these artworks are alive. So to me that makes sense. *Ontological model* runs the risk of going back to a level of abstraction that is exactly what I do not want to do. I want to emphasize the irreducible materiality of the artwork itself.

T.H.: I would like to ask you a question concerning another of your works, the interactive transgenic work Genesis. *I think what is fascinating about it are the different experiences and processes of translation and transference. First there is the scripture, «the word» and a foundational text from our western tradition, then we have a code, and at the end an image, an experience, the artwork itself.*



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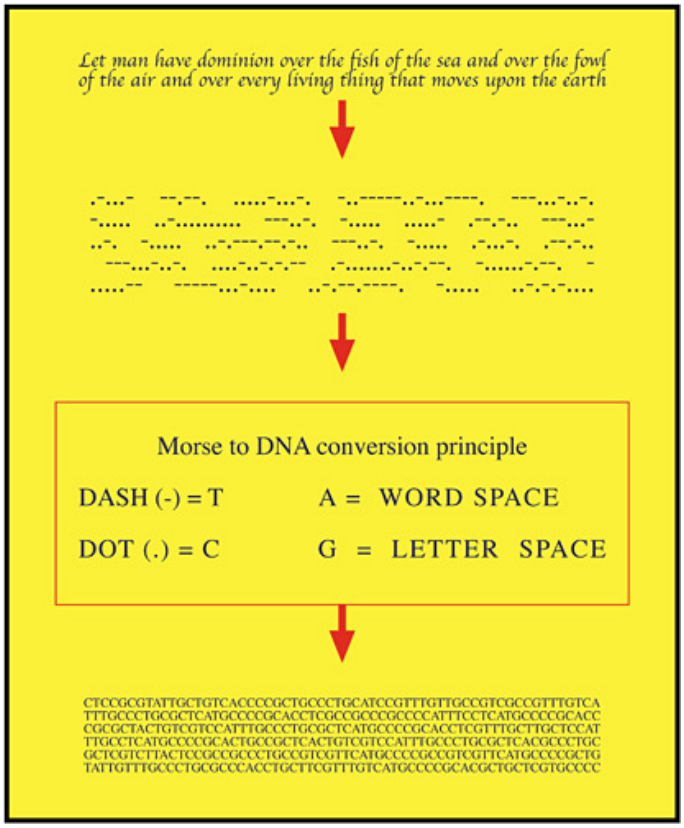
E.K.: You have to look at the specificity of these codifications that I have employed. The first one is the biblical passage in English, because, you know, the Bible was written through a very long period—it is believed from the twelfth to the 2nd century BCE—by many voices and many different styles. And then all those different individual isolated pieces of writing were one day collected and eventually translated into Greek and Latin.



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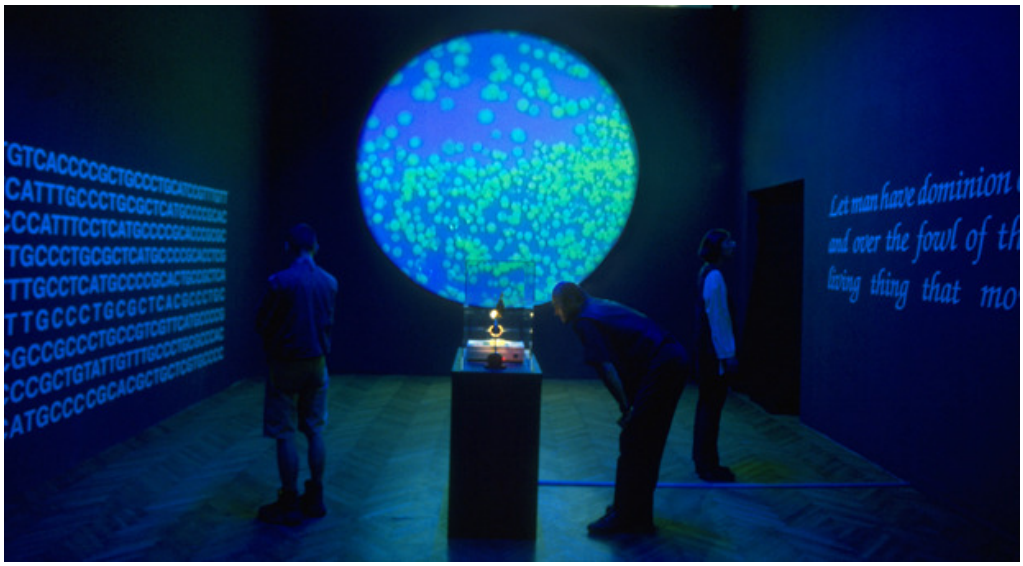
When they came down to English, when King James produced a translation, he hired an army of scholars, so to speak, who borrowed from the original classical Hebrew text (which included portions in Aramaic), and from other translations, in other words, from multiple sources. So this is a multi-vocal, processual text, that never stopped being so. It has always been a text that has continuously flowed, converged and diverged, not to mention the fact that these ancient idioms did not have space between them or punctuation. The level of ambiguity in those writings is enormous. When you look at my translations, it might make you understand that this is not a fixed text. Then you have the perverse irony that the passage that I selected is one in which God gave men total control over all life forms. And King James sent his book, his translation, aboard ships to conquer the new world, to effectively dominate everything that lived.

Then I translate to Morse code. Morse was a member of a nativist party, that was anti-Semite, xenophobe, that argued that Blacks should go back to Africa, Jews should go back to Middle East and so on. And what is the very first thing ever that Morse transmitted trough the Morse code? «What hath God Wrought?»



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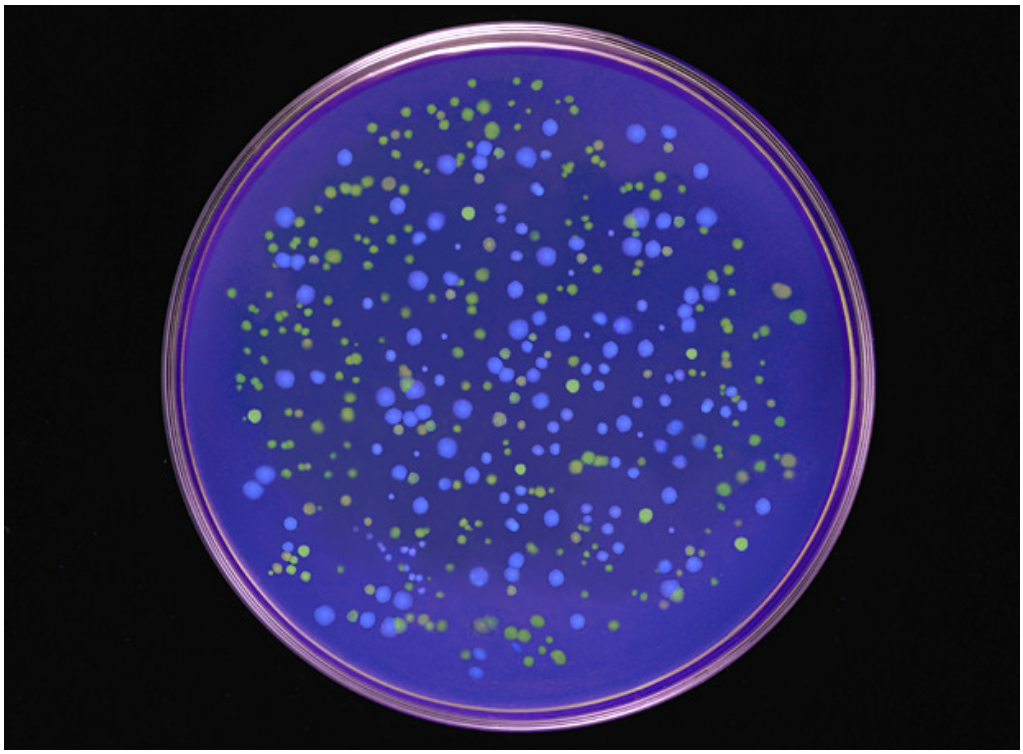
Then I created my own code to allow the passage from the two elements of Morse code to the four elements of genetics, the four genetic bases. I transmitted the resulting DNA via email to a company specialized in genetic synthesis. So the DNA that I received two weeks later by FedEx back in 1999 made me realize that in this new world that we were entering, the old Darwinian logic would no longer be applicable. Darwin describes evolution as based on mutation and natural selection. I envisioned that the new evolutionary forces of that new era are Wall Street and FedEx. The first decides what lives and the second delivers. There are other factors that determine evolution in the 21st century that are no longer exclusively based on the natural world Darwin found and studied. We don't find and study anymore, we invent, build, modify and send it. So I created the Genesis bacteria and presented the viewer with a dilemma, to click or not to click. That is the question. It is an ethical choice that I leave up to the participant.

T.H.: Thank you for the lucid explanation of the structure of your work. How did you come up with the concept of the work and the structure of the transferences? Did you have this genealogy, starting with the translations of the Bible to Morse and modern communication systems like FedEx already in your mind, based on historical research you obviously made?



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E.K.: The creative process is a continuum, always recursive. You have preliminary motivations and plans, and the process itself plays a role in the outcome. You always learn and discover new things along the way. It's wonderful when you finally see it—that's the artwork.

T.H.: I see. Now I would like to transition to an interpretation of your work, which is relevant to a history of images. I am particularly referring to some writings and statements of Frank Fehrenbach and Horst Bredekamp, and a certain perspective or method in art history. Fehrenbach's essay gives an excellent example of this methodology. [7] *He has situated the artificial creation of your green fluorescent rabbit «Alba» in a continuous tradition that stretches from Leonardo da Vinci to 20th century conceptual art. For example, by showing that Leonardo, as a would-be creator of genetic art, used mercury to simulate movements in dead mice.* [8] *These interpretation from art history or let's say a kind of «art history of science» are now and then very convincing, without a doubt. Nevertheless it is also a questionable effort to write a genealogy ranging from the Renaissance deus artifex, like Leonardo da Vinci's, to your perspective.*

E.K.: A genealogy from Leonardo to Eduardo? I don't see it...

T.H.: Yes, or from the framed catalogue images of Leonardo to the framed catalogue images of Eduardo.

E.K.: You have a point. One cannot confuse images that document the work with the work; one cannot reduce a physical work to its representation. You only know the work when you experience it; what I mean is that, at that moment, there is a coupling between you and the work. So forcibly your experience is uniquely yours and this matters, it should be part of your analytical efforts. Interpretation based on ideas or images is okay if you declare that, i.e., if it's clear between you and your reader that you are not discussing the work itself. There's an inevitable disconnect between art practice and art history. The former looks forward and the latter usually looks towards the past. I'm very fond of a passage from Nietzsche's «On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.» Let me read it to you. «To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and for action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and from action or for merely glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to serve history only insofar as it serves living.»

T.H.: Can you explain the difference between, let's say, the famous Etruscan Chimera of Arezzo*, which Fehrenbach mentioned in his essay, and your* living chimera*, the GFP Bunny «Alba» from 2000?*

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Is there a difference you would like to emphasize? I would say there is obviously an undisclosed problem of what is an object or what is its objecthood.

Abb: 15 >

E.K: Yes, because as a bio artist I don't make objects, I make subjects and a subject is truly alive, biologically alive, not a metaphor. In this sense it demands a response.

T.H.: Responsibility in the sense of care?

E.K.: Responsibility and respondibility. It is a totally different entity in the world and if you're responsible for its existence you're also responsible for its wellbeing.

T.H.: But it is still an artwork, an artifact. Criticism and art history still handle it as an object.

E.K.: You have to start writing an art history of subjects. You have to abandon the idea of writing an art history of objects. This has not happened yet.

T.H.: Here we are at one of your strongest claims, as you said, and I quote: «Myth becomes reality». Can you please explain this paradigm change from a mythological form of representation to a biological presentation, to a pure biological existence of life itself?

E.K.: From the *Chimera of Arezzo* to Arcimboldo to any contemporary work, or even modern— the inverted mermaid that you find in Magritte, where the head is a fish and the body is a woman—you are in the realm of representation. Representation is to *re-present*, to present again. To render visible something that you already know. You and I are not representing each other right now because we are present; we present ourselves to each other. When the artwork is biologically alive, it is the same phenomenon.

The fact that a living biological artwork carries extrabiological information, such as my Genesis bacteria, for example, does not invalidate the fact that the bacteria have a life of their own to live. The fact that «GFP Bunny,» because it combines rabbit and medusa, can be thought of as a living chimera—as opposed to the sculpture of Arezzo, which is representational—does not undermine the fact that the bunny had a life of its own, a cognitive and emotional world of its own to explore.

T.H.: To me that sounds a little bit like iconological reductionism. Not all renaissance paintings, which in your words re-present a myth, have their meaning only by means of their representational solution. When Titian painted or represented a myth from Ovid's metamorphosis, there is still much more to say about the meanings of that painting which are not re-presentational in a narrow sense.

E.K.: «Much more to say» has to do with exegesis, not with the logic of representation. These are two different things: one is the logic of representation, to present again what we already know, to which your Titian example conforms strictly; the other is the multiple functions that this representation can have in a given society, in a given period. For example, the logic of representation can serve or attack the status quo. We may have more, or different things, to say about a Titian painting today than in the past. The function of any given representation changes in time because the world changes. Exegesis is part of the reception process but it is also production, creation of meanings. So, I am not saying that you cannot make something with objects, you certainly can. I'm not invalidating the creation of art objects. That would make no sense. What I am saying is that before the creation of art subjects, all you had where art objects or art events like a performance, but now you have something different, something new that has no tradition—a new category of art has been created. The moment that art subjects exist the world is a different place.

T.H.: Okay, but what about, for example, the historical form of the portrait. Would you agree that a portrait could also be close to what you call an art subject? As an image that regards us, that provokes a response? This dimension of responsivity underlines the possibility of the living as being regarded by images. This kind of response is not necessarily a force of pure re-presentation.

E.K.: A portrait cannot be an art subject, unless the portrait is itself literally alive. An inert image is not alive and only the living can be a subject. I can make my point in simple terms, by pointing out the difference between your mother giving you a kiss and saying «welcome son», and a photograph of your mother hanging on your wall. The existence of artworks that are truly alive, a physical and intellectual fact that did not exist before, calls for a reconfiguration of tropes, an adjustment on our part concerning our use of figures of speech that ascribe lifelike qualities to images and inert objects. Now that we do have real living artworks, we can no longer look at an image or object and say that it is alive. New realities do change perception and language.

T.H.: Let's not talk about Roland Barthes now. But what about the power of images in concrete politics, for example the omnipresent case when an enraged crowd of people is burning the image *of a dictator on the streets.*

E.K.: It's a trope. If one confuses a trope with the thing it is a problem. I cannot imagine that anybody who is engaged in serious intellectual analysis and discussion fails to recognize a trope. «Alive» is not the best word to describe what actually happens with an image in that case. Images can be powerful but desire is not an image. A crowd burning the *image* of a dictator on the streets expresses the desire to overcome biological reality (in other words, overthrow or kill the dictator) through the employment of a trope.

T.H.: I would like to address the last question on the relation between art and science, or aesthetics and epistemology. Let me thereby come back once again to the comparison between Leonardo and Eduardo. When we think about Leonardo's epistemological studies, his drawings of anatomy, his studies for military purpose or his sketches of birds' flight, there is always an attempt to discover an already existing being that is already in the world. Let's simply call that nature. *It's a rather Aristotelian way of a description, imitation and maybe also perfection of nature, the legibility of world, in a way Hans Blumenberg described it in his essay on the imitation of nature and the idea of the creative being.* [9] *If I understood you right, this is not exactly your point, because in your work there is a very strong dimension of communication, which belongs to the new possibilities of a* postmimetic *world making.*

E.K.: I am just an artist and a poet. Those are the two artforms that I pursue. My claims are very specific. I have for 30 years developed a body of work in the realm of experimental poetry and art. Those two interests of mine, very much inflected by philosophical inquiry, have sometimes crossed over from one to the other. Any nomenclature that begins with post has a previous form or period for reference. It is not my case. I wish to forge a new reality. Bio art is not post-anything, it inaugurates its own logic. I am not interested in explaining the world; I am interested in creating a new one.

T.H.: That sounds like a great last word, thank you for the insights into your aesthetics. We are very much looking forward to your future artworks. It would be a pleasure to welcome you at the NCCR eikones in Basel.

Fussnoten

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Eduardo Kac, On holography, in: Ross Harley, ed., New media technologies, New South Wales 1993, pp. 122–39.

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Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de linguistique généreale (1916), Paris 1972.

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László Moholy-Nagy, The New Vision 1928 and Abstract of an Artist, New York 1946; László Moholy-Nagy, Vision in Motion, Chicago 1947; Eduardo Kac, Gegen den Gravitropismus, Bruder, Hochauf, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit, in: Der Freund 4, 2005, pp. 80–88.

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Oliver A. I. Botar, The Origins of László Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism, in: Eduardo Kac, ed., Signs of Life. Bio Arts and Beyond, Cambridge 2007, pp. 315–344.

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Eduardo Kac, Satellite Art: An Interview with Nam June Paik, in: DIVA – Digital and Video Art Fair 2005. A Tribute to Nam June Paik, Köln 2005, pp. 8-9. Originally published in O Globo, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, July 10th, 1988.

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Gabriella Belli and Daniela Fonti, ed., Gino Severini (1883-1966), futuriste et néo-classique, exhibition catalogue Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, Museo d'arte moderno, Rovereto 2011/2012, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2011.

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Frank Fehrenbach, Compositio corporum: Renaissance der Bio Art, in: Uwe Fleckner, Wolfgang Kemp, Gert Mattenklott, Monika Wagner and Martin Warnke, ed., Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus, Vol. 9, Berlin 2005, pp. 131–176.

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Horst Bredekamp/Barbara Maria Stafford, Hyperrealism – One Step Beyond, in: TATE ETC. 6, 2006, pp. 1–4.

Hans Blumenberg, «Nachahmung der Natur»: Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen, in: idem, Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 55–103; cf. idem, Legibility of World (1979), Chicago 1990.

Abbildungen

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Eduardo Kac, Paris, 14 June 2011. Photo © Toni Hildebrandt.

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Eduardo Kac, Natural History of the Enigma, transgenic work, 2003/08. Edunia, plantimal with the artist's DNA expressed only in the red veins of the flower. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Natural History of the Enigma, transgenic work, 2003/08. Edunia, a plantimal with the artist's DNA expressed only in the red veins of the flower. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, performance on Ipanema beach, Rio de Janeiro, 1982. Photo © Belisario Franca.

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Eduardo Kac, performance on Ipanema beach, Rio de Janeiro, 1982. Photo © Belisario Franca.

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Eduardo Kac, «Maybe then, if only as», 30 x 40 cm. Digital transmission hologram, 1993. Private collection in Kassel, Germany. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Chaos, 30 x 40 cm. Reflection hologram, 1986. Collection of the MIT Museum, Cambridge, MA. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Natural History of the Enigma, transgenic work, 2003/08. Edunia, a plantimal with the artist's DNA expressed only in the red veins of the flower. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Natural History of the Enigma, transgenic work, 2003/08. Edunia, a plantimal with the artist's DNA expressed only in the red veins of the flower. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Genesis, 1999. Transgenic work with artist-created bacteria, ultraviolet light, internet, video (detail), edition of 2, dimensions variable. Collection Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM), Valencia, Spain. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Genesis, Morse Code into DNA. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Genesis, 1999. Transgenic work with artist-created bacteria, ultra-violet light, internet, video (detail), edition of 2, dimensions variable. Collection Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM), Valencia, Spain. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Eduardo Kac, Genesis, 1999. Transgenic work with artist-created bacteria, ultra-violet light, internet, video (detail), edition of 2, dimensions variable. Collection Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM), Valencia, Spain. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Chimera of Arezzo, Etruscan, 5th century B.C., Florence, Museo Archeologico. Aus: Frank Fehrenbach, Compositio corporum: Renaissance der Bio Art, in: Uwe Fleckner, Wolfgang Kemp, Gert Mattenklott, Monika Wagner und Martin Warnke, ed., Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus, Vol. 9, Berlin 2005, S. 171.

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Eduardo Kac, GFP Bunny - Paris Intervention, 2000. Poster, 11 x 17 in (27.94 x 43.18 cm) each. Photo courtesy the artist.